

After Action Report

Operation Magnolia

FSIS-State Food Defense Partnership Exercise

May 7, 2009

Food Safety and Inspection Service

Final Report

June 16, 2009

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) are actively addressing the need to maintain the safety and defense of the country's supply of meat, poultry, and egg products. During a crisis, it is critical that the Department be able to efficiently and effectively coordinate with its counterparts at the state and local level, as well as within other Federal agencies and the private sector. On May 7, 2009, FSIS conducted a tabletop exercise, "Operation Magnolia", in Jackson, MS and at FSIS headquarters in Washington, DC. The exercise focused on the roles of Federal, state, and local government agencies and the meat, poultry and egg products industry to work together to detect, prepare, respond to, and recover from a significant incident. Emphasis was placed on a team approach to incident response, coordination, integration of capabilities, problem identification, communications, and resolution through preparation, response, recovery, and multi-agency coordination. The exercise provided FSIS the opportunity to test and validate operating guidelines and directives for responding to a significant incident involving the intentional adulteration of meat products within an FSIS regulated facility. The ultimate goals were:

- protecting public health,
- minimizing suffering, loss of life, and personal injury;
- minimizing damage to property; and
- minimizing disaster- or emergency-related service disruption, which would have an adverse impact on the government, the communities, and the businesses and their employees, reputation, and food products.

This report identifies areas of strengths and weaknesses that were observed during the exercise and offers recommendations for improvement.

Objectives

Operation Magnolia focused on enhancing the coordination and communication between FSIS, other regional federal agencies, state and local government agencies, and industry stakeholders. The objectives for the exercise were to clarify roles and responsibilities and improve coordination and communication among:

- FSIS Program Offices and associated field staffs;
- state and local public health, law enforcement and emergency response agencies;
- primary Federal emergency response organizations; and
- private sector stakeholders in the meat industry.

Strengths of the Exercise – What Worked Well?

The exercise involved participation by the following stakeholder groups:

- FSIS field and Headquarters personnel from the Office of Field Operations; Office of Program Enforcement, Evaluation, and Review; Office of Public Health Science; Office of International Affairs; Office of Management; Office of Policy and Program Development; Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Education; Office of Outreach, Employee Education and Training; and Office of Data Integration and Food Protection;
- staff from the Department of Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, USDA's Office of Inspector General (OIG), Food and Drug Administration, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and National Guard Civil Support Team (47th CST);
- State of Mississippi government agencies, including the Department of Agriculture and Commerce, Mississippi Board of Animal Health, and Mississippi State Department of Health;
- local government agencies, including the Hinds County Sheriff's Department
- the food industry, including Koch Foods, Peco Foods, and Sara Lee Corporation; and
- the academic community, including Mississippi State University.

Participants were actively engaged in the exercise. There was open dialogue and good networking among stakeholder groups.

Areas for Improvement – What Did Not Work Well in the Exercise?

Exercise Structure

Participant comments about the exercise structure included:

- the scope of the emergency should be expanded to include more stakeholder groups
- the exercise scenario should be tailored to conditions relevant for the FSIS District Office
- the injects contained too much information, minimizing the need to think creatively about next steps
- more time was needed to discuss Phase 1 of the scenario and less time was needed for Phase 4
- consider providing breakout areas to facilitate communication among smaller groups
- participants did not play out activation of EOC or unified command structures

Exercise Participants

Several participants commented that all of the public and private sector organizations that would be involved in responding to a food tampering incident were not available for the exercise. In particular, the presence of the following groups would have added value:

- federal government – the Environmental Protection Agency
- state agencies – Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality and Mississippi Emergency Management Agency
- local government – public health and emergency response
- industry – representatives from the retail and restaurant portions of the supply chain
- other – consumer and environmental advocacy groups

Each stakeholder group agency or organization should also consider participation by their Public Information Officer.

Communication/Coordination

Although there was good verbal interaction among stakeholder groups, several participants commented that some form of written communication among participants, such as mock emails, might enhance coordination in future exercises.

Participants from industry commented that the exercise scenario did not accurately portray the food industry's ability to provide large amounts of information in the early phases of the exercise. Therefore, real time coordination on critical information should improve the response capabilities for all stakeholder groups.

Incident Command System (ICS) Issues

What triggered each stakeholder group to organize into or participate in a multi-agency incident command structure?

- State and Local government – illnesses; response mandated by law and mission
- FSIS – routine response to an incident such as presented in the scenario;
- industry – trigger for industry was FSIS' response to suspicious activity in establishment
- other Federal agencies – scale of emergency – Emergency Response Team

What was the effectiveness of the ICS structure for this exercise?

- State and Local government – ICS was useful
- FSIS – effective; groups worked together – there were no territorial issues
- industry – limited – seemed like organized chaos
- other Federal agencies - effective

Who was in charge?

- State and Local government – changed throughout scenario phases; included Department of Health and Department of Agriculture;
- FSIS – by law, FSIS has jurisdiction in establishment
- industry – changed by phase, but industry was able to identify and coordinate with decision makers
- other Federal agencies – varied throughout exercise; FSIS was lead, except for criminal investigation, where FBI and USDA OIG were leads

Were decisions coordinated among stakeholder groups?

- State and Local government – yes
- FSIS – yes; “war-room-like” setting may have enhanced coordination
- industry – no; although active discussions occurred, industry was often informed about decisions
- other Federal agencies – yes

Other Observations

All government agencies need to continue learning and practicing ICS.

Better coordination between government agencies and industry is needed to further our collective food defense prevention and response capabilities.

Several participants commented that a coordination model was needed for working with Tribal Nations on response actions for a food contamination incident.

Consider expanding exercise to allow each stakeholder groups to share information about the roles, responsibilities and capabilities of their organizations.

Some of the requirements for coordination with FSIS Headquarters disrupted the flow of the exercise for District Office staff.